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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000046

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TAGS: PREL PHUM SNAR TH BM

SUBJECT: SHAN MILITIA LEADER REACHES OUT TO INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

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CLASSIFIED BY: John Spykerman, Con/Pol Officer, Consulate General Chiang Mai, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶11. (S/NF) SUMMARY. Leaders of the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) have invited Consulate General staff and other members of the international community in northern Thailand to visit Shan villages on the Thai-Burma border, seeking to draw attention to human rights abuses in Burma's Shan State and boost the legitimacy of their pro-autonomy organizations. ConGen Chiang Mai and Embassy Bangkok have declined to meet because of these leaders' ties to drug trafficking operations and uncertainty about their current relations with other Shan political groups and the Royal Thai Army. Local sources familiar with the Shan community note these invitations could be the result of political or military desperation. End Summary.

¶12. (S/NF) Yawd Muang, "secretary of foreign affairs" for the RCSS, an organization that serves as the de facto political wing of the SSA-S, contacted Post in early March to invite PolOff to visit Shan villages along the Thai-Burma border opposite Mae Hong Son province. Yawd Muang said the invitation came from SSA-S leader Yawd Serk, who wanted to discuss a variety of issues with the U.S. government, including human rights abuses, drug trafficking, the ongoing SSA-S military campaign against Burma's State Peace and Development (SPDC) forces, and the role of his organization in the international dialogue on Burma's future. Yawd Muang claimed to have secured the blessing of RTA officers to host foreign diplomats in SSA-S territory, located mostly in shrinking pockets along the Thai-Burma border. After PolOff declined to travel to the border area, Yawd Muang requested Post host a meeting with Yawd Serk and other RCSS members.

¶13. (S/NF) Taking into account Yawd Serk's involvement in drug trafficking (he succeeded infamous drug lord Khun Sa as the leader of the armed Shan resistance) and the uneven relationship the RCSS has with other Shan groups, ConGen and Embassy Bangkok declined the meeting requests. Although Yawd Muang, also known as Yordtai or Phillips, said Yawd Serk had led his organization away from supporting themselves with drug-trafficking profits, multiple sources - SSA-S supporters included - strongly dispute this claim, with one source also noting that Yawd Muang himself has been the target of drug smuggling investigations by Thai police.

¶14. (S/NF) Yawd Serk likely sees himself as having much to gain from engaging diplomats, whether or not he faces an imminent attack from the Burmese Army. One RTA Pha Muang Task Force

colonel familiar with the SSA-S said he did not see any signs that the SPDC or its United Wa State Army (UWSA) allies would mount increased attacks on the SSA-S positions in the near future. Although the SSA-S has suffered occasional setbacks against the SPDC and UWSA in recent years, its remaining positions - especially those along the Thai border - are well-protected by terrain and other factors. The only recent clashes involving the SSA-S have occurred 25 km deep inside Burmese territory, leaving border areas relatively calm and allowing Yawd Serk room to plan political maneuvers, RTA sources said. However, other sources have observed Burmese military units strengthening their positions near SSA-S locations in recent weeks, lending more credibility to theories that the SSA-S anticipates a military confrontation.

¶5. (S/NF) A representative of the Free Burma Rangers, a relief organization that coordinates closely with Burmese ethnic groups, added that the SSA-S fears a Burmese Army dry season offensive similar in brutality to that faced by the Karen National Liberation Army and residents of Karen State last year. He said Yawd Serk, worried about diminishing options and military resources, could be looking to attract international support.

End of the Line, Or Looking for a New Direction?

¶6. (S/NF) Those familiar with Shan politics say Yawd Serk feels increasingly isolated from other Shan groups, such as the exile-dominated Interim Shan Government and various Shan human rights groups active in northern Thailand that have built ties with the international community over the past several years. Meanwhile, Yawd Serk's RCSS and SSA-S find themselves largely trapped inside Shan State and shut off from the outside world, watching other groups obtain international development assistance.

¶7. (S/NF) SPDC successes against many of the ethnic resistance

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groups, along with the change of government in Thailand, have brought the future of the RTG's relationship with Yawd Serk into question. A source with the RTG's National Intelligence Agency said the NIA and RTA still value having SSA-S forces maintain a buffer zone on the border and occasionally turn to them for help with counter-narcotics efforts (even if the SSA-S has its own suspected narcotics networks). Yet it is unclear how far RTA officials are willing to let Yawd Serk reach out to the larger Shan population in Thailand to attract the support he needs to maintain legitimacy as a leader.

¶8. (S/NF) According to RCSS's Yawd Muang, RTA officials had blessed the organization's proposed meetings with diplomats and have issued identification cards to certain RCSS and SSA-S members to travel in northern Thailand. A local source reported that the Japanese Consul General in Chiang Mai initially accepted a similar offer to visit Doi Taileng village in SSA-S-controlled territory in February. However, the RTA blocked the Consul General from reaching the border, suggesting that the RTA was less enthusiastic than SSA-S and RCSS members wanted to admit or realized. (Note: We are unable to confirm this account, as the Japanese Consul General departed post soon after this reported trip. End Note.)

¶9. (C) With these higher-level outreach efforts stymied, Yawd Serk continues to seek smaller-scale support. Members of the Shan community in northern Thailand - of which the NIA estimates there are 200,000 - say they receive pressure to send money back across the border to the SSA-S, especially for those with relatives serving in the resistance. In addition, ethnic Shan in Chiang Mai report that Yawd Serk's supporters periodically collect donations during festivals and other ceremonies at temples attended by Shan.

Comment

¶10. (S/NF) We remain uncertain exactly why Yawd Serk chose now to push for closer contact with the outside world. It may be just an ambitious idea from the RCSS "foreign minister" or perhaps a sign of desperation in the face of mounting enemy forces. Sources familiar with Yawd Serk doubt he would stick around for a final military defeat and would likely accept a payoff similar to the one that prompted Khun Sa's departure 10 years ago. However, any BA offensive comparable to last year's campaign in Karen State raises concern for vulnerable Shan villagers caught between the SPDC's brutal oppression and the RTG's refusal to recognize their ethnic cousin Shan as refugees.

¶11. (S/NF) The NIA estimates as many as 300 Shan per day cross illegally into Thailand. The prospect of even more spilling over the border is likely enough motivation for the RTG to continue to value Yawd Serk and his SSA-S as a buffer against the Burmese Army and to provide relative stability for Shan villages in SSA-S territory. But Yawd Serk likely realizes that toleration of his organization by the RTG does not equal credibility, especially in the eyes of the international community. With the international community paying more attention to Burma and other Shan groups gaining legitimacy, the SSA-S probably feels some desperation to have the outside world ignore the darker side of their operations and treat them as a valid representative of the Shan cause in order for them to survive. End Comment.

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